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The Complexity of Religion: Religious imagery, physicality and duality within Andrew Marvell's *The Coronet*

Much has been said regarding the doubleness of Andrew Marvell's poetry. Nearly everything produced by Marvell seems to intertwine, contradict, and exploit itself in surprisingly powerful ways. Given the socio-political climate of the day, it is unsurprising to see such complexity expressed in Marvell's poetry. An intense new exploration of the physical body, a greater understanding of the physical nature of our world, and new ideas regarding the rule of law characterized seventeenth century thought. Even the eternal world of religion experienced radical and occasionally violent changes.

As the world around Marvell pushed forward rapidly, England saw the birth of some of the greatest minds to grace the literary world. Poets such as George Herbert, John Donne, and John Milton used poetry to explore the relationship between themselves and God through the written word. Devoted followers infused their poetry with a wide range of juxtaposing emotion – love, adoration, frustration, grief, and even despair –in an attempt to describe their relationship with heaven.

Latent throughout Marvell's religious poetry is a growing tension between the physical and spiritual. He seeks to fully experience the intensity of spiritual conversion, yet the physical, natural, and temporal world seems to continuously put up an impossible barrier. Particularly throughout "The Coronet" Marvell explores the seemingly paradoxical gap between the divinity of God and the weakness of man. Many scholars have seen Marvell's duplicity throughout "The Coronet" solely as a "representation of the sacred with virtuosic self-display" (Cousins,

Religious Dialogues 149). This reading, however, does not take fully into account the narrator's spiritual journey. Although scholars have argued Marvell's inordinate focus on the physical world make it his poetry difficult to call devotional, it is actually through the duality of the imagery invoked throughout "The Coronet" that the narrator is able to find a way to truly worship Christ.

Marvell's sumptuous imagery begins with the title of his poem –"The Coronet." Although the title clearly specifies a single crown, there are as many as three crowns alluded to throughout the poem. First, the crown of thorns with which the narrator "long, too long," has crowned the head of his Savior. Next are those which "once adorned my shepherdess's head," but has since been dismantled as a gift, and finally "Heaven's diadem." These three crowns form the point of a rather interesting and seemingly opposing dichotomy –the crown of thorns representing the sinner, the crown made for the shepherdess representing the pastoral element, and finally Heaven's diadem representing the celestial.

The crown of thorns is not a particularly surprising element in Marvell's poem. The image of thorns and Christ's suffering on the cross was a common source of meditation for Christians of the seventeenth century. As Bruce King has pointed out:

'The Coronet' belongs to devotional literature upon Christ's passion and the contrast between His earthly and His heavenly crown. It is common to poems within this tradition that their rhyme scheme, sound, imagery, and syntax should suggest the woven crown of thorns. (741)

In this aspect, Marvell's poem certainly aligns itself as a religious poem. His meditations on the cross add to the religiosity and spiritual longing expressed by the speaker. However, Marvell also brings in an unexpected twist.

The weaving which occurs throughout the poem is not the crown of thorns. In fact, the crown of thorns is dropped after the first few lines. Instead, the narrator finds himself dismantling and weaving the crown of flowers which is associated with the shepherdess. Marvell adds, almost as an aside that, "my fruits are only flowers," (ln 6) but this moment is particularly laden with Christian imagery. According to Christian tradition, it was partaking of fruit which lead to mankind's separation from God. In an almost ironic sense of doubleness, the speaker openly implicates himself with the fall. Not only is the speaker a man who has sinned, but one who continues to partake of forbidden fruit through the dismantling and creating of his new crown. Interestingly enough, although the old crown is supposedly dismantled, the image continues to push through to the end. It is with this crown, rather than the crown of thorns, that Marvell's speaker begins to weave a new one.

Although the pastoral crown is the image which interweaves itself throughout the poem, it is not the conquering image. Ultimately even the speaker cannot deny that the materials of his previous life are insufficient to praise the "King of Glory," and ultimately his "fruits" remain "only flowers" to be crushed under foot. King points out, "the speaker begins the poem by believing that he can make redress to Christ for His sufferings. He ends the poem in humility, now realizing that his own pretensions were sinful" (743). Instead of the narrator's crown, it is the crown already created for Christ which comes out conqueror. The speaker's attempt to replace "Heaven's diadem," can certainly be perceived as the height of hubris, however, the speaker undergoes a transformation through the act of creating his crown.

A.D. Cousins further remarks, "One could not of course describe the poem itself as linear, as tracing a straight and narrow path to Christ, because that is what Marvell's persona seems to hope for and understands that he cannot achieve by himself" (163). The path certainly is

not linear, however, by applying King's remarks on the nature of devotional poetry, a very poignant sort of intertwining seems to take place. This intertwining brings the three crowns together in a way which ultimately subverts the hubristic expressions of Marvell. First we have the initial image of the crown of thorns, then the pagan crown is literally brought down as it is dismantled, next it is weaved, a second crown made for Christ is brought up, and the final mention of the pagan crown is brought low once more. The circle is completed by intertwining the pastoral, the sinful and the heavenly. It is only as the crown associated with Christ is physically brought high that the crown of the pagans is brought low.

Woven throughout the poem, one can see the process of the Fall and the potential for redemption. Throughout the process of making the crown, the speaker seems to come to terms with the extent of his own personal corruption. It is only after Marvell's speaker sees a snake within his own fruit that he is able to fully reconcile himself with the corruptness of his gift. The snake, of course, serves as another great allusion to the Fall, but also as a poignant reminder that the speaker of the poem is unarguably flawed. He causes the thorns on Christ's head, presumptuously seeks to mend the wounds on his own, and moves forward with dubious motives in the creation of a garland made of pagan material. Yet through these flaws, he is also brought to the feet of Christ.

As we move through the poem, the snake continues to take on a fuller significance. As King asserts, "The poem's argument cannot be followed without recognizing biblical allusions and recalling the significance of traditional Christian symbols" (King). Christian symbolism often aligns Satan with the snake, consequently exacerbating the speaker's displeasure at finding it in his crown. During the Biblical fall God tells the serpent, "I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his

heel” (Gen 3.15). As a member of the human race, Marvell (and his speaker) create an odd sort of tension between themselves and the snake. The speaker is supposed to have “enmity” with this creature, however, it has cropped up out of something which the speaker has carefully crafted. Cousins concedes, Marvell’s poem is not one, “wherein good is recognized and desired but evil is nevertheless and often inexplicably pursued” (162), however, it must be admitted that the relationship between the speaker and the snake is not an easy one. The garland created by the speaker, and therefore his work, is not necessarily equated with the snake, but it is clear that the garland and the snake are so completely intertwined that they can never be truly separated.

The presence of a serpent is particularly troubling when once watches it in relation to the head and feet. As expressed in the Biblical account, the serpent has power to bruise the heel, but will ultimately be bruised on the head. Interestingly enough, although the speaker seeks to crown the head, the beginning of the poem begins with a wound created by the speaker on Christ’s head. As stated in Genesis, it is Christ’s duty to bruise the head, not to *be* bruised. To reconcile his wound, the speaker seeks to create a garland, but this garland becomes intertwined with the serpent. The serpent must be crushed underfoot, but it is only once the speaker has given up his hope to crown the head that the serpent can descend from head to foot. In many ways, it is a rather scary moment when the serpent hovers between head and foot. Although the narrator makes the correct move in the end, there is a strong moment of tension as the garland, intended for the head, travels to the foot. In response to this “act of understanding” embedded at the end of the poem, Cousins remarks:

That softly damaging admission introduces an account of his duplicity’s folly and scope. The ‘King of Glory’, he has not forgotten, wears ‘Heaven’s diadem’. The problem is therefore that the ‘mortal glory’ signified by the poet’s intended

coronet of praise will be superfluous. It is, moreover, already and inescapably tainted (165).

The gift of the coronet is unavoidably tainted by the presence of the snake, and as such the speaker cannot possibly hope to replace “Heaven’s diadem.” However, by casting his garland physically to the feet of the Savior, the speaker opens the door for his potential redemption. By giving up the garland, the speaker disentangles himself from the snake while simultaneously drawing physically closer than he had been at the beginning of the poem. No, he does not crown the head, but the honor of being crushed under the foot of Christ is nonetheless a great honor.

The physicality of Marvell’s garland –being crushed under the foot by the Savior –seems particularly violent to a modern reader. However, in a world where Herbert strikes a board and Donne demands that his heart be battered, the crushing of a garland can seem rather tame. Robert Ellrodt criticizes Marvell for poetic works that “look out of an expressionless face with sensual lips which, like his conversation before strangers, betrays no secret” (Ellrodt 73). It is true that the language of “The Coronet” is not particularly emotional, particularly in comparison with the extreme, and almost violent emotions which are expressed by Marvell’s contemporaries. However, the lack of personal emotion does not render the poem entirely closed.

Even on a surface level, the physicality of Marvell’s poem is rather striking. Throughout the poem the Savior’s head is pierced, the flowered garland is created, a snake is discovered, and the garland is subsequently destroyed. The methodical process which creates and destroys the garland creates emotional distance with the audience, but the physical actions intertwine the narrator into the redemptive process. Unlike the violent and frustrating physicality expressed in Donne and Herbert, the physical conflicts woven throughout *The Coronet* also bring spiritual harmony. The poem begins with piercing thorns, but end with the speaker offering his garland to

be crushed under the foot of Christ. This particular move is a very physical one, yet seeks to bring spiritual satisfaction. The physicality woven throughout *The Coronet* is backed with spiritual implications, and the spiritual implications bring meaning to the decisive and even violent action suggested by the speaker.

Marvell treats his worship of Christ with the utmost distance –hardly speaking of him and instead infusing his poem with the process of himself. Yet, through *The Coronet*, he also brings himself fully into the poem. By fusing his creative process with the process of the fall and mankind’s subsequent redemption, Marvell also brings himself on the most intimate terms possible with his Savior. He is not only extoling the experiences of mankind, but experiencing them. The Savior of this poem is not powerful because of the elaborate descriptions utilized, but because the poem itself is a testament to the fallen nature of man and the Savior’s ability to reshape the dismantled towers. The nature of the poem brings the glory of Christ to the front.

Inherent within Marvell’s Christianity lies the concept of struggle. The reality of the physical world and the longing and submission required for the spiritual world are often at odds with each other. The physicality of Marvell’s world interrupts the spirituality, the crowns become all mixed up and the snake finds himself hovering between the head and the foot. However, in the ultimate paradox, these complexities do not form a barrier between the speaker and his Savior. Rather it is *through* the juxtaposition of the religious and the non-religious that Marvell is able to find himself at the feet of the Savior. Stumbling through the irreligious, Marvell somehow finds himself worshiping with devotion.

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